

Furman Humanities Review

Volume 31 *August 2020*

Article 18

2020

"The World is God's Great Book in Folio": Prodigy Reports in England 1638-1643

Xinxin Anna Zhang '20

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/fhr>

Recommended Citation

Zhang, Xinxin Anna '20 (2020) ""The World is God's Great Book in Folio": Prodigy Reports in England 1638-1643," *Furman Humanities Review*: Vol. 31 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/fhr/vol31/iss1/18>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Humanities Review by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.

**“THE WORLD IS GOD’S
GREAT BOOK IN FOLIO”:
PRODIGY REPORTS IN ENGLAND 1638-1643¹**

Xinxin Anna Zhang

“If we repent, God will repent of the evil.... If we repent not, God will repent of the good.”² This was one of the closing remarks of a sermon given to the House of Commons by Edmund Calamy on December 22, 1641. In the sermon, Calamy was greatly concerned with the prospect of England as a nation, namely her ruin and repair in light of Jeremiah 18:7-10. God was able to pluck up and destroy an ungodly nation, but before doing so, He would first give warnings: “...he hangs out his white Flag of mercy, before his red Flag of utter defiance; first he shoots off his warning Peeeces, before his murdering Peeeces.”³ Forewarnings of various kinds would be God’s “white flags of mercy,” after which He would expect men’s proper repentance. A nation turning away from evil would please God, and therefore procure national blessings so

¹ L. Brinkmair, *The Warnings of German by Wonderfull Signes* (London: Printed by John Norton, for John Rothwell, and are to be sold at the Sunne in Pauls Church-yard, 1638), §2.

² Edmund Calamy, *Englands Looking-Glasse, Presented in a Sermon, Preached before the Honorable House of Commons, at their Solemne Fast, December 22, 1641* (London: Printed by I. Raworth, for Chr. Meredith, and are to be sold at the Crane in Pauls-Church-yard, 1642), 3, 57. [In this paper, original spellings are kept for all primary-source quotations].

³ *Ibid.*, 3-22. As a good Puritan preacher, Calamy divided his sermon into numerous points and subpoints. His point on God’s flags came from doctrines one and two of the sermon.

Furman Humanities Review

that He would build and plant her. Her oblivious handling of His mercies, however, would lead to her ruin.⁴

Throughout the sermon, Calamy shed light on God's two natures—transcendence and immanence. God's supremacy was illustrated in His "independent and illimited Prerogative over all Kingdoms and Nations" and His "absolute Right to govern over His creatures."⁵ His transcendence enabled Him to execute His mercy and/or judgment immanently, reflected by the many action verbs Calamy used in depicting God at work. Men's belief in these two attributes allowed them to view God as the Author of every occurrence in their lives and to endow meaning to each event, especially to the anxiety-inducing ones that England was experiencing at the time of this sermon.

The end of King Charles' (r.1625-1649) third Parliament (March 1629) witnessed the unpleasant parting between King and Parliament. Charles claimed to personally rule by his royal prerogatives. During this time, the people's voices were suppressed by Parliament not being convened and Reformed doctrines compromised in the Church of England. Puritans' condition exacerbated as William Laud—a representative of English Arminianism—became the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633 and introduced anti-Puritan church reforms. Harsh punishments befell resistant Puritans, such as William Prynne, John Bastwick, and Henry Burton. Outside of England, in 1636-7, Laud imposed episcopal supremacy on the Scottish Presbyterian kirk, demanding usage of the Canons and the Book of Common Prayer, which led to two Scottish Bishops' Wars 1639-40. Thus, after over a decade without Parliament, the 1640s began with fiercely escalating political and religious tensions between King and Parliament.⁶

⁴ Ibid., 22-62. Doctrines three and four of the sermon.

⁵ Ibid., 3-4.

⁶ For a concise and precise account of the escalated conflicts during Charles' Personal Rule without Parliament (1629-40), see Mark

In light of these intensified incidents and on the eve of Charles' departure from London due to popular support of Parliamentary critiques, the Puritan Calamy delivered this sermon to demonstrate God's active involvement in English affairs. The belief in God's divine guidance in human affairs—both triumphant and catastrophic—was known as Providentialism. As Calamy delineated, God could guide England using “eight wayes.”⁷ In the course of analyzing printed pamphlets from this period, I have been able to augment Calamy's eight ways with a ninth: namely, God speaking to England through prodigies, or supernatural occurrences, whose appearances dominated Wars of the Three Kingdoms (1638-1651), which included the English Civil War beginning in 1642.⁸

A recent thorough study on England's Providentialism, Alexandra Walsham's *Providence in Early Modern England*, analyzes the significant impact that Providentialism had left in the English society between roughly 1580-1640. Walsham depicts crucial moments of God at work in the world to argue that Providentialism functioned as a “cultural cement” that forged sentiments of “collective Protestant consciousness” and “anti-Catholic and patriotic feelings” during national crises.⁹ However, as Walsham moves beyond the chief

Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed, Britain 1603-1714* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 113-157.

⁷ Ibid., 13-19. The eight ways were: the voice of His ministers, the voice of His lesser judgements, the death of His godly servants, the voice of other Protestant nations, the bloody rebellion in Ireland, many sad divisions, delay of the reformation of the Church, and the voice of our own consciences.

⁸ Earthquakes, tempests, monstrous births, triple suns, and bloody water were all viewed as prodigies. For selected annotated pamphlets in seventeenth-century England, see Timothy Fehler and Abigail Hartman, eds., *Signs and Wonders in Britain's Age of Revolution: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁹ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5, 333.

Furman Humanities Review

frame of her study, she broadly states that after 1642 when the English military conflicts began, sectarian struggles undermined the vitality, visibility, and credibility of divine activities; she thus dismisses Civil War-related portents as “overtly and crudely polemical.”¹⁰ Walsham also generalizes that they were “being harnessed as signs of God’s anger with the Laudian and Caroline regime.”¹¹ This paper attempts to complicate Walsham’s viewpoints on Civil War-related prodigies by extending analysis beyond the chief terminus of her book. Far from being crude, these prodigy reports, I argue, reflected a complex Protestant consciousness even if it was united by a common anti-Catholicism. Furthermore, the range of interpretations of prodigies expressed in the pamphlets also indicated both varying degrees of hope and uncertainty concerning the current political-religious situations and different expectations concerning the viewers’/readers’ responses to these prodigies. While Walsham provides a broad analysis of England’s Providentialism across an eighty-year period, I hope to anchor this paper to a shorter period of time in order to more fully analyze and contextualize specific pamphlets in their precise circumstances. I focus, then, on the manifestation of God’s Providence in prodigies on both national and local level from 1638 to 1643, a period that saw the outbreak of actual military conflicts in the British Isles through the first year of the English Civil War.

In pursuit of this fuller depiction, I will investigate three genres of printed works. First are sermons, represented by Calamy’s previously mentioned *Englands Looking-Glasse*. After briefly discussing the Calvinistic understanding of God’s Providence, I will move onto the next two genres: long pamphlets providing theoretical framework for interpreting prodigies, and shorter pamphlets depicting specific prodigious

¹⁰ Ibid., 5-6, 218-224, 333-334.

¹¹ Ibid., 220.

occurrences.¹² The pulpit functioned as a powerful medium for broadcasting news, especially when events came to touch on the “soteriological concern,” as Calamy’s sermon suggested.¹³ Calamy delivered his sermon orally to the Commons, but the House later published it for greater circulation. Beyond the sermon, the pulp literature could feed into common people’s concerns and fears in the midst of turbulence.¹⁴ L. Brinkmair’s “Briefe Discourse of Prodigies” in his extended pamphlet *The Warnings of Germany* (1638) and John Vicars’ *Englands Warning Pieces* (1643) laid out theoretical frameworks regarding how one should understand prodigies. Lastly, the much-shorter pamphlets published throughout 1641 and 1642 illustrated ways in which the populace perceived and interpreted specific prodigies currently in the news.

These pamphlets could exert an influence on readers across England. All of them were individually printed for or by specific people in London, thus they were by nature less subjected to royal censorship, which was breaking down in the midst of the political conflicts.¹⁵ More importantly, the pamphlets did not just stay in London. The carrier and postal sys-

¹² I will not include many newspaper accounts because the period of 1638-1643 did not witness a flourishing newspaper industry. Newspapers did not initially attract many readers when they first appeared not only because partnerships among the editor, printer, and publisher were constantly changing, but also because page designs and editorial techniques were haphazard. Moreover, the occasional ongoing censorship until 1643 prevented the free flow of newspapers. See Joad Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper: English Newsbooks 1641-1649* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 20-26, 184.

¹³ Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper*, 188-193.

¹⁴ Jerome Friedman, *The Battle of the Frogs and Fairford’s Flies: Miracles and the Pulp Press During the English Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), x-xiv.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

tems, established and advanced by 1635, made readership outside London possible.¹⁶ The illiterate benefited from the development of the communication system as well, for in this still-oral early modern culture, they could listen to the literate reading pamphlets in public places and still absorb the messages.¹⁷ A wide readership was especially crucial at the beginning of the English military conflicts. The realm of media resembled a bloodless battlefield, on which each group strove for its ideological ideals.

Theological and Practical Underpinnings of Providence: Calvin & German Wonder Books

The theological assurance of Providentialism in early modern Protestant thought owed much to the French theologian John Calvin (1509-1564). Defining God's Providence as "the order which [He] maintains in governing the world and in the conduct of all things," Calvin believed that God has presided over all seemingly fortuitous occurrences to His purpose.¹⁸ Although God's foreknowledge had predetermined all happenings in human history, He has indeed showed instances of repentance, Jeremiah 18:8-10 being one of them.¹⁹ His purpose of doing so lay in His willingness to offer opportunities of repentance—through punishments or warnings—to whomsoever He wished to pardon.²⁰ Calvin did not mention prodigious signs in his work, but in practical divinity, some of the Calvin's divine "punishments" would be turned into prodigies,

¹⁶ Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper*, 238-241.

¹⁷ Friedman, *The Battle of the Frogs and Fairford's Flies*, 5.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1541 French Edition), trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 417, 446 (chapter 8).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 455. This passage in Jeremiah was also Calamy's passage of preaching.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 457.

my ninth way that God spoke to a nation. Provoked by humanity's wrongdoings, God would send signs as reminders. Such mentality, then, inspired God-fearing men to interpret the occurrences that could be as natural as comets and bad weather and as supernatural as monstrous births and sky battles.²¹

England's interests in providential signs can be seen even in Reformation Germany.²² Philip M. Soergel's *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination* encompasses an extensive analysis of German wonder books. Although Martin Luther regarded prodigies as less significant than the Scripture, he did acknowledge God's "ubiquitous presence" in them, which left liberty for his disciples to "exploit...the wonders."²³ In Job Fincel's 1556 book *Wunderzeichen*, designed with an apocalyptic outlook, he incorporated descriptions of hundreds of natural wonders, monstrous births, and celestial signs.²⁴ A more aggressive work with systematic categorization, Caspar Goltwurm's *Wunderwerck und Wunderzeichen* (1557) included wonders since the beginning of history.²⁵ Inheriting such a legacy, by the late 1630s, German captain L. Brinkmair composed *Warnings of Germany*, which incorporated both systematic interpretive discourse and individual prodigy accounts from the first two decades of German wars.²⁶

²¹ See also Walsham, *Providence*, 20. For England, she states the most vividly exhibited was the "Puritan propensity for detecting the finger of God in the most mundane events." If the Puritans discovered God's presence even in mundane happenings, then more so in extraordinary ones.

²² See also Fehler & Hartman, *Signs and Wonders*, 1-2.

²³ Philip M. Soergel, *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonder Book in Reformation Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65-66. See also 34-64.

²⁴ Ibid., 67-92.

²⁵ Ibid., 93-122. See also Walsham, *Providence*, 72.

²⁶ This conflict later became known as the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), which initially started with the tension between several Protestant and Catholic states in the Holy Roman Empire and

**Theoretical Interpretive Frameworks:
Brinkmair & Vicars**

In 1638, the Holy Roman Empire had been afflicted by warfare for twenty years. Although England did not directly participate in the continental conflict, she kept a watchful eye on occurrences in her sister Protestant states. Such an awareness became clear in Calamy's sermon as he made several references to Germany. Indeed, God had spoken to England through Germany: "Me thinks I heare *Rochell, Bohemia*, the *Palatinate*, and other parts of *Germany*, saying: Oh England look upon us, and learn to be righteous."²⁷ Later on, demanding speedy repentance, he stated, "Sinne destroyed *Rochel* and the *Palatinate*; it brought the sword into *Ireland*, and will bring it into *England*, unlesse we turned away from all our evill doings."²⁸ Destruction caused by sin had been ravaging in places close to England; thus she must repent.

My first pamphlet with an explicit discussion of what he considered the appropriate interpretive framework, Brinkmair's *Warnings of Germany*, originally a German pamphlet translated into English and published in 1638, served as a preemptive warning piece for the English context. The fact that the English translation of this pamphlet appeared just when political tension in England was escalating demonstrates English interests in recognizing God's previous works on the Continent and her urgency to learn from continental prodigies so that she might maintain her peace.²⁹ Before analyzing specific prodigies that had occurred in the German wars, Brinkmair provided an extensive systematic "Discourse on Prodigies" in which he defined the notion of God speaking through

then escalated to a power-struggle among almost all European powers.

²⁷ Calamy, *A Looking-Glasse*, 15-16.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Fehler & Hartman, *Signs and Wonders*, 36.

prodigies and more importantly, theoretically categorized different types of prodigies—natural, moral, and divine—and their proper interpretations. Prodigies, as “extraordinary prognosticating signs,” carried God’s forewarnings pertinent to “judgement ensuing.”³⁰ Natural ones were generally celestial and elementary, involving heavenly bodies and basic elements. Moral ones consisted of men’s “affections, passions, words, or actions.” Divine ones contained the presence of divinity in them.³¹ Therefore, one should treat prodigies with prayer, contentment, and a faithful heart.³²

By 1643, five years after the publication of *Warnings of Germany*, England had already experienced a year of warfare. The focus of geographical locations of warnings shifted therefore from distant Germany to nearby Britain. John Vicars in *Prodigies & Apparitions, or, Englands Warning Pieces* (the second long, interpretive pamphlet) stated that “we may no longer looke abroad into forreigne parts, nor many yeeres past.”³³ Also shifted was the tone used to talk about prodigies. Brinkmair’s was rather detached, and his discourse was descriptive in nature whereas Vicars was less likely to detach

³⁰ Brinkmair, *The Warnings of German by Wonderfull Signes*, §4. [Brinkmair’s “Discourse on Prodigies” occupied unnumbered pages in his preface; I have thus cited his section numbers].

³¹ Ibid., §8.

³² Ibid., §12. “Contentment” referred to being satisfied with what God provides: “Secondly we may not bee too curious in searching after the particular evils which Prodigies foreshew, much lesse to know their circumstances, when where, and how they shall happen.” This thought of Brinkmair’s corresponded to that of Calvin that Christians ought “not to seek out the things which God has wanted to be hidden, and also not to neglect those which He has revealed, out of fear of being condemned for too great curiosity on one hand or of ingratitude on the other.” See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 417.

³³ John Vicars, *Prodigies and Apparitions, or, Englands Warning Pieces* (London?: n.p., 1643), 12. See also Fehler & Hartman, *Signs and Wonders*, 37, 80.

himself from England's religious strife as a devout Calvinist Englishman writing about English affairs.³⁴ He reflected on several representative English prodigies with a clear anti-popery agenda. As tensions escalated, prodigies became increasingly politically charged but also endowed with spiritual messages, especially—but not exclusively—by the Parliamentarians.³⁵

Brinkmair had, in his prodigy discourse, brought up a relevant question now applicable to England in 1643: how would one know to whom a prodigy is applied in the midst of a conflict between two antagonistic groups? "The only necessary thing is," Brinkmair said, "for each private person of what sort-soever...to examine his heart, wayes, and spiritual estate, that he may reforme himselfe according to the word of God, lest hee also perish."³⁶ Namely, everyone should examine him-/herself first even though the natural tendency is to cry woe to others. Vicars' approach to prodigies then was different from Brinkmair's: Vicars regarded any God-sent prodigy as a

³⁴ See Julia Gaper, "Vicars, John," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004, 1.

³⁵ Walsham, *Providence*, 5-6; Fehler & Hartman, *Signs and Wonders*, 37. William E. Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics, and Providence in England 1657-1727* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 14: "Parliamentarian prodigies therefore often involved more dramatic divine intervention than did royalist prodigies." One should also note that prodigies in Vicars' pamphlet were representative but limited. In the penultimate paragraph (pp. 56-57) of the end of his extended accounts of prodigies, Vicars acknowledged that "I have made no mention all the while, of the many strange, fearfull, and unaccustomed Eclipses of the Sunne, and Moone, which have been seen from yeare to yeare both in other parts, and also in our owne English Horizon...many notable changes and overtures of States and Kingdoms; as also that late and memorable conjunction of Saturne and Jupiter among us in February last, 1643...doth prognosticate and demonstrate unto us that great alteration and vicissitude of the Kingdoms."

³⁶ Brinkmair, *Warnings of Germany*, §10.

sign particularly against the Papist others and demonstrated this stark interpretative difference to Brinkmair in almost all the episodes in his pamphlet.

Vicars' account of destroyed churches served as an especially adequate proof of his mentality. Echoing Calvin, he affirmed Brinkmair's thought that some prodigies might seem to be natural occurrences, yet they all took place under God's appointment.³⁷ Horrific thunderstorms and winds, for instance, were inflicted upon the Withcombe Parish Church in Devonshire on October 21, 1638, Micham, Greenhith, and Stone churches in Kent on January 14, 1639, and St. Anthony Parish Church in Cornwall on Whitsunday, 1640.³⁸ In all cases, church buildings were defaced, pulpits torn away, beams fallen down.³⁹ Vicars added that in the 1638 occurrence, many church-goers' clothes, including those of the minister's wife, were burnt off and their bodies scorched.⁴⁰ All defaced churches shared a common detail: being full of ritualistic objects, which were the source of God's wrath. Vicars was certain that these occurrences had been God's righteous act to purge the "Romish-rubbish": sumptuous church buildings, altar-worship, Communion-tables, crucifixes, and Popish pictures.⁴¹ From a Puritan perspective, these churches had committed apostacy.

Here one sees, in polarized England, Vicars' agenda against audacious church-goers who would not relinquish popishness. These prodigies could have been, as we saw in Calamy's terms, a "red Flag of defiance" for the ruined people

³⁷ Vicars, *Englands Warning Pieces*, 27-46. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 446; Brinkmair, *Warnings of Germany*, §1; Fehler & Hartman, *Signs and Wonders*, 5.

³⁸ Vicars, *Englands Warning Pieces*, 28-29, 39-40. They would all be natural prodigies according to Brinkmair's categorization.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 27-46.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37-44.

but more so a “white flag of mercy” for England.⁴² Destructions of the aforementioned churches could be due to their lack of improvement in words and deeds.⁴³ Vicars hoped that, after such severe destructions, truth and purity could prevail following the readers’ repentance and that this mentality of penitence could ideally spread across the country if wide readership of this pamphlet enlarged belief in God’s divine intervention.

Besides the church incidents, Vicars understood several other English prodigies revolving around his anti-popishness. He set up his argument by interpreting the famous 1618

⁴² For the discussion of God’s flags, see Calamy, *A Looking-Glasse*, 11.

⁴³ References to events like these in the south and southwest (Kent, Devon, and Cornwall) are not surprising after the post-Reformation research findings by scholars such as Robert Whiting and Eamon Duffy. Whiting’s *The Blind Devotion of the People* surveys the survival of Catholicism in southwestern England (Devon and Cornwall) during the institutional English Reformation from reigns of Henry VIII to Elizabeth I. Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars* provides an overview of fierce pressure and disruption that the English Reformation brought about in light of English Catholicism in pre-Reformation/late Medieval era. In the section “The Visitation of Kent, 1557,” Duffy outlines the intense visitation or restoration of Catholicism that Kent went through during Mary’s reign. In *The Voices of Morebath*, Duffy focuses exclusively on Morebath, this thirty-three-family town in Devon, and its resistance to the Reformation, based on parish accounts by Sir Christopher Trychay, the vicar of Morebath from 1520 to 1574. From these three works, one senses reluctance to relinquish ritualistic objects in England south and southwest, thus other parishes in Kent, Devon, and Cornwall became the Puritan Vicars’ targets of criticism. See Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

Comet as a criticism against England's "meer externall and sensuall peace..." under James I's reign (1603-1625), and more importantly, a harbinger for England's division of prominent figures and for her sins.⁴⁴ Vicars further advanced his contention by introducing a man-child, born on October 3, 1633, with two heads, two hearts, two arms, and a stump.⁴⁵ Two heads represented the King and Parliament, two hearts "Papists and Protestants," two arms English and Scottish armies, and the stump "lamentably torne and mangled Ireland."⁴⁶ This prodigy, too, was a forerunner of "some fearfull judgement to come for sinne," sinners being Papists living "for beggarly Ceremonies and Romish trash and trumpery" rather than pious believers "for Gospel and a holy Reformation."⁴⁷ Additionally, Vicars described the manifestation of God's operating hands on the sea. The Spaniards on one day in September 1640, attacked the English shore, but God saved England from them by directing a Dutch fleet to fight for England since England was not prepared to defend herself.⁴⁸ The event was a warning through deliverance that intended to remind England of her lack of diligence.⁴⁹ England ought to examine herself, lest more severe godly judgment would arrive.

Vicars ended with a sky battle, a divine prodigy that had an optimistic prospect. On August 4, 1642, in Alborough,

⁴⁴ Vicars, *Englands Warning Pieces*, 12, 15-17. See also Walsham, *Providence*, 174, "comets and eclipses heralded momentous events, particularly the subversion of kingdoms and the death of princes, statesmen, and peers."

⁴⁵ Vicars, *Englands Warning Pieces*, 23.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 25-26.

⁴⁸ Vicars, *Englands Warning Pieces*, 45-49. See also Walsham, *Providence*, 245-246.

⁴⁹ See Vicars, *Englands Warning Pieces*, 49: Vicars believed that God, through the Protestant Dutch, "[had rung England] a peale of thundering Canon" to awaken England out of her "marvelous Lethargy of ease and carnall security."

Furman Humanities Review

a town in Suffolk, the loud sound of drums and small shots of muskets were heard; just when a captain regarded the fearful noise as the approach of enemies, it turned to sweet, melodious sound of music.⁵⁰ Although Vicars was writing in 1643, this sky battle happened not long before the battle of Edgehill (October 23, 1642), the first one of the Civil War. Therefore, this prodigious event would originally have been a harbinger for the real battle to come, as Brinkmair saw incidents happening “in ayre” as “most lively pictures of the same to bee on earth.”⁵¹ Thus, Vicars in this moment at the beginning of armed conflict felt that “terrible storme of woes” have begun by Papists; nevertheless, a glorious peace and perfect reformation” shall be achieved eventually, just as sounds of gunshots became those of music.⁵²

Individual Prodigy Reports / Pamphlets

England’s interests in prodigies did not stop at the extensive theoretical analysis provided by Brinkmair and Vicars. I will now explore shorter pamphlets with specific episodes. Numerous anonymous authors published much shorter chapbooks—likely more widely read than the longer ones—to interpret both national-level occurrences indicating national crises and more local-level ones regarding divine punishment of specific individuals.⁵³ These individual prodigy news reports, compared with Vicars’, revealed more hope for unity between antagonistic groups and more uncertainty and fear regarding

⁵⁰ Ibid., 51-52.

⁵¹ Brinkmair, *Warnings of Germany*, §11.

⁵² Vicars, *Englands Warning Pieces*, 15, 55-56.

⁵³ See Fehler & Hartman, *Signs and Wonders*, 5. One should also note that although they did not necessarily include exhaustive theoretical frameworks, these authors often started and/or interrupted their storylines with general admonishing words: listing biblical verses, tracing precedents, and typically working to establish credibility for their reports.

England's future, which led the pamphlets' authors to different kinds of expected responses by the readers.

National-Level Occurrences. It is interesting to compare the same prodigy across two genres of pamphlets. In fact, the sky battle in Vicars' pamphlet had also been published as a separate one a mere week after the incident. In *A Signe From Heaven* (1642), the anonymous author began by referring to signs that had appeared in continental cities—Prague, Leipzig, and Nordlingen—during the German wars. By shifting to Suffolk, though, heavenly signs ceased to be distant tales but current events. The sky of Alborow appeared “tokens in the Ayre,” which indicated the troubles approaching.⁵⁴ England, this “sinfull Land and Nation,” had prompted God to send “this most strange signe from Heaven.”⁵⁵ The author closed this pamphlet with the hope for God to “have mercy upon this sinfull land and Nation” and the expectation for men to demonstrate “true and unfained repentance” by supplication.⁵⁶

When this prodigy occurred, full-fledged war had not yet broken out, but King Charles had already begun mobilizing his army, which indicated that the King and Parliament would soon be at war. However, the author did not explicitly mention the Papists or denounce them. Rather than being quick to identify enemies, this pamphlet was simply one with a sense of urgency supplicating God's mercy and demanding repentance. Vicars, on the other hand, accused the Papists of being “the chaffe” and “the drosse” and hoped them to be burnt up for “a glorious...Reformation” in the Church.⁵⁷ Such contrast illustrated Vicars' more uncompromising attitude toward England's religious division and determination to eliminate the Papists.

⁵⁴ Different spelling of the town in this pamphlet and in Vicars'.

⁵⁵ *A Signe From Heaven, or a Fearefull and Terrible Noise heard in the Ayre at Alborow* (London: Printed by T. Favvcbt, 1642), 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁷ See Vicars, *Englands Warning Pieces*, 56.

Furman Humanities Review

In terms of England's political division, one could also see a similar kind of phenomenon in *A Strange Wonder, or The Cities Amazement* (1642), which depicted unnatural tides above the London Bridge on February 4.⁵⁸ Five hundred men witnessed an unmoving and dead tide up in the sky. Afterwards, a new tide roaring from Greenwich in a "furious manner" raised the original tide by four feet and then ebbed in a "confused" and "unaccustomed" manner.⁵⁹ Although England ought to uphold "a hate in popish idolatry," the author expected readers to also pray for "a perfect Concord" between the King and Parliament.⁶⁰

This prodigy occurred not long after King Charles had left London but still a half year before the war began. The tides' strange nature could have prognosticated God's displeasure toward England's political strife. At this point, her future was ambiguous. Heavy and disheartening events—death from battles and natural disasters—could follow, yet few was certain about how and when.⁶¹ Charles' departure due to the popularity of Parliamentary support would be a big change in England. As Friedman points out, "The idea of change often elicited fear";⁶² it could have been England's fear for change that prompted desire to pray for the peace between the King and Parliament, which would have been the most foreseeable and the least changing future.

The same kind of prayer also appeared in *A Great Wonder in Heaven* (1643), a sky battle account on Edgehill two months after the battle there. "Two jarring and contrary

⁵⁸ The date of publication was February 4, 1642 [1641, printed on the title page, was according to the old calendar].

⁵⁹ *A Strange Wonder, or, The Cities Amazement* (London: Printed for Iohn Thomas, [1642]), A2v-A3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, A4.

⁶¹ Even after the English Civil War had started, few could have foreseen that the conflict would last until 1649 and end with the execution of Charles.

⁶² Friedman, *The Battle of the Frogs and Fairford's Flies*, xiv.

Armies” met in the sky for several consecutive weekends.⁶³ The author interpreted this prodigy as “[God’s] wrath against this Land, for these civill wars” and believed He would “send a sudden peace between his Majestie and Parliament.”⁶⁴ England’s political division and military escalation post Edgehill was even more obvious, and yet this pamphlet still projected the same outlook: that readers shall supplicate for peace rather than deeper conflicts. Through this mindset, one actually sees another sort of Protestant consciousness different from that of Vicars, for, as interpretations in the above three pamphlets suggested, none strove for the elimination of the other side but rather advocated for harmony in England.

Divine Punishment of Individuals. Another type of warning applied directly to specific individuals. The “retributive justice” of each person, through the media, could serve as a warning for people who had not experienced the punishment.⁶⁵ One also sees the complication of the dichotomies between the King and Parliament / the Papists and Protestants. Catholics (or popishness in Vicars’ pamphlet) were not the only causes of judgment as some prodigy accounts also reported strange retributions, death, and organ deformity falling on Protestant sectarians as well for not conforming to the Church of England.

A Strange Apparition at an Alehouse (1641) presented such “A Relation of a Strange Iudgement” from a Puritan perspective. Two gentlemen fell into disagreements while having a discourse on Mr. Burton, Mr. Prinne, and Doctor Bastwike, three prominent earlier resisters against Archbishop

⁶³ *A Great Wonder in Heaven* (London: Printed for Tho. Jackson, Ian. 23, 1643), 4-6. [1642 according to the old calendar]. *The New Yeares Wonder* (London: Printed for Robert Ellit, 1643) recorded the same prodigy/sky battle and reached the same conclusion as *A Great Wonder in Heaven*. See also Fehler & Hartman, *Signs and Wonders*, 80.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁵ Walsham, *Providence*, 65.

Laud's anti-Puritan church reform. One gentleman praised for their good conscience while the other accused them of just being "base dissembling fellows" and extended such criticism to all Puritans.⁶⁶ After some more humiliating remarks, this second gentleman started to sweat, grow faint, and his ear began bleeding.⁶⁷ The author closed this pamphlet admonishing the audience to remember this punishment, that he who had demeaned God's people shall be avenged.⁶⁸

Despite the Puritan-leaning perspective that the pamphlets above projected, my final two prodigy accounts were employed by supporters of the Church of England to discourage the common people from siding with Protestant sectarians. Speedy proliferation of Protestant sects in the mid-seventeenth century complicated the already existing religious tension and posed danger to the unity of Church of England.⁶⁹ Both Anglicans and Puritans were anti-Catholics (and to some extent represented Walsham's "Protestant consciousness"); yet within these two Protestant groups, disapproval and denunciations of each other were also growing in terms of both religious and political disagreements. Under such circumstance, a further

⁶⁶ *A Relation of a Strange Apparition* (London: Printed for Richard Smethurst, 1641), 3-4. For more details on Burton, Prinne, and Bastwike, see Fehler & Hartman, *Signs and Wonders*, 266 (endnote 17) and Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed*, 129.

⁶⁷ *A Relation of a Strange Apparition*, 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁹ For examples of proliferation of sectarians in the popular press, see the broadsheet *A Catalogue of the Severall Sects and Opinions in England and other Nations* (London: Printed by R.A. 1647), the pamphlet *Religions Lotterie, or the Churches Amazement* (London: Printed by T.F. for F.S. Iuly 20, 1642), and the minister Thomas Edwards' massive *Gangræna, or A catalogue and discovery of many of the errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious practices of the sectaries of this time* (London: Printed by T.R. and E.M. for Ralph Smith, 1646), which went through several editions and enlargements in 1646. See also Fehler & Hartman, *Signs and Wonders*, 234-237.

split of Protestant consciousness emerged. The next two prodigy pamphlets demonstrated Anglicanism's attempt to demonstrate God's discontentment with nonconformists. The consequences of rejecting certain Anglican rites became sound warnings for others.

The prodigies in these two pamphlets all took place in the same area: Northamptonshire, a Parliamentary stronghold. As the first pamphlet's author John Locke recorded in *A Strange and Lamentable accident* (1642), a woman named Mary Wilmore residing in the village Mears Ashby gave birth to a headless baby because she had not wished her child's head "to be signed with...the Crosse" during baptism, for she had been affected by sectarians.⁷⁰ Wilmore regarded the cross as a symbolism of "a pernicious, popish and idolatrous ceremony."⁷¹ In *Wonderfull Newes* (1642), Robert Stichbery, the churchwarden of Toscester, removed a stained glass window from the parish church with strong determination.⁷² Two days later, his wife died from severe pain and torment in her limbs, and he himself died of extreme madness; moreover, Stichbery's sister, Anne, experienced rotten hands after she had torn out pages from the Book of Common Prayer.⁷³

Both accounts recorded the sectarians' offense against certain Anglican conventions: baptismal rite, stained-glass windows, and the Prayer Book. Overt rejections of such practices, as both authors suggested, led to personal disasters. The intention of these two pamphlets were completely opposite to that of *A Strange Apparition of an Alehouse*. God, Who clearly

⁷⁰ John Locke, *Lamentable Accident* (Printed at London: for Rich: Harper and Thomas Wine, and are to be sold at the Bible and Harpe in Smithfield, 1642), A3r.

⁷¹ Ibid., A3r.

⁷² *Wonderfull Newes* (Printed at London for Tho: Andrews, 1642), A2.

⁷³ Ibid., A2r-A3. Although not the Scripture itself, the Book of Common Prayer consisted of verses from the sacred Scripture that shall not be abused.

Furman Humanities Review

was on the side of the Church of England in this time of conflict, could not tolerate sacrilegious acts against His sacred conventions and did not leave the offenders' sins unpunished. Through these two prodigies, the authors demonstrated sectarians as schismatics and established the unity of the orthodoxy and authority of the Church of England. Locke concluded *Lamentable Accident* with a call for unity: "one Lord, one faith, and one baptisme" and hoped for the restoration of "the bond of peace."⁷⁴ The other author closed *Wonderfull Newes* with a declaration, or an expectation, that no one shall challenge to alter anything in the Church or church conventions.⁷⁵

One could also further contrast destructions of churches in *Vicars' Englands Warning Piece* with the two prodigies above. While Anglican rites were a source of God's wrath in one case, they were under His protection in another. *Lamentable Accident* and *Wonderfull Newes* greatly undermine claims of one-sided Civil-War prodigies and of an unified Protestant consciousness. Not every portent in the early Civil War era was a sign of God's "anger with the Laudian and Caroline regime"⁷⁶; rather, contra Walsham, prodigy pamphlets represented a variety of political and religious viewpoints. Furthermore, there were two distinctive types of Protestant consciousness just according to these individual punishments: one Puritan and the other Anglican.⁷⁷ Even during the complication caused by religious strife and contested interpretations, the importance of prodigies as a means of demonstrating proper responses was not undermined; the pamphlets vividly presented God's operating hands, the readers' hopes and insecurity, and their expected proper responses.

⁷⁴ Locke, *Lamentable Accident*, A3-A4r.

⁷⁵ *Wonderfull Newes*, A3r.

⁷⁶ Walsham, *Providence*, 220.

⁷⁷ If we add the conclusion from the last section (national-level occurrences), we see at least three sorts of Protestant consciousness in this early stage of Civil War.

Conclusion

“God only punisheth for sinne....Consider that there is no way or meanes to remove God’s anger and judgement, but by removing of our sins....Therefore be perswaded to reforme your selves.”⁷⁸ In this issue of the *Scottish Dove*, where God’s Providence was seen for the first time in a newspaper’s extensive editorial remarks, editor George Smith admonished his readers in a five-page editorial on Providence (out of his eight-page weekly newspaper) to take to heart the actions performed by “the Immediate hand of God.”⁷⁹ Echoing Calamy, Smith suggested to readers the importance of repentance through prayer and faithfulness.⁸⁰ *The Scottish Dove’s* remarks indicate the popularization of Providence in print culture (as the demand for newspapers and weekly news of the Civil War grew), as this newspaper encompassed the essential message of all analyzed sources in this paper (sermon and pamphlets).

Nevertheless, careful reading of the pamphlets and contextualization of the dramatically portrayed prodigies enables us to sense the complex range of interpretations of prodigies and range of human emotions. They were more than crude propaganda pieces. Vicars’ great personal involvement ideologically in *Englands Warning Pieces* formed a stark contrast to Brinkmair’s “Discourse of Prodigies.” Yet, not all Puritan-leaning authors were as fiery and certain as Vicars was. In the early 1640s when the future was uncertain, readers’ hearts were drawn to supplicate God for His mercy and peace between the King and Parliament. In individual prodigy reports, God cast His wrath upon both the Papists and Sectarians,

⁷⁸ George Smith, ed., *The Scottish Dove* (Number 8: December 1-8, 1643), (London: Printed for Laurence Chapman, 1643-1646), 58.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 57. See also Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspapers*, 34-35.

⁸⁰ Smith, *The Scottish Dove*, 59. For Calamy’s point on national and individual reformation, see *A Looking-Glasse*, 22-52.

Furman Humanities Review

which demonstrates several Protestant consciousnesses. Regarding types of prodigies, we encountered a great diversity: defaced churches, monstrous births, sea and heavenly battles, unnatural tides, bleeding ears, strange deaths, and rotten hands. All of these wonders were signs offered to foster the appropriate response—even if the authors differed in what that should be—for the anxiety of this early stage of English Civil War.

Works Cited

- Brinkmair, L. *The vvarnings of Germany By wonderfull signes, and strange prodigies seene in divers parts of that countrey of Germany, betweene the yeare 1618. and 1638. Together with a briefe relation of the miserable events which ensued. All faithfully collected out of credible High Dutch chronicles, and other histories by L. Brinckmair Captaine. As also a learned and godly sermon preached before the lords the States at Norrimberg. Anno 1638.* London: Printed by John Norton, for John Rothvvell, and are to be sold at the Sunne in Pauls Church-yard, 1638.
- Burns, William E. *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics, and Providence in England 1657-1727.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
- Calamy, Edmund. *Englands looking-glasse, presented in a sermon preached before the Honorable House of Commons at their late solemne fast, December 22, 1641 by Edmund Calamy.* London: Printed by I. R. worth for Chr. Meredith, 1642.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1541 French Edition). Translated by Elsie Anne McKee. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009.
- A catalogue of the several sects and opinions in England and other nations With a briefe rehearsall of their false and dangerous tenents.* [London]: Printed by R.A., 1647.

Furman Humanities Review

- Cressy, David. "Lamentable, Strange, and Wonderful: Headless Monsters in the English Revolution." In *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, 40-63. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (Second Edition). New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Duffy, Eamon. *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Edwards, Thomas. *The first and second part of Gangraena, or, A catalogue and discovery of many of the errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious practices of the sectaries of this time, vented and acted in England in these four last years also a particular narration of divers stories, remarkable passages, letters : an extract of many letters, all concerning the present sects : together with some observations upon and corollaries from all the fore-named premisses / by Thomas Edwards...* London: Printed by T.R. and E.M. for Ralph Smith, 1646.
- Fehler, Timothy and Abigail Hartman, *Signs and Wonders in Britain's Age of Revolution: A Sourcebook*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Friedman, Jerome. *The Battle of the Frogs and Fairford's Flies: Miracles and the Pulp Press During the English Revolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.
- A Great wonder in heaven shewing the late apparitions and prodigious noyses of war and battels seen on Edge-*

Hill neere Keinton in Northampton-shire : certified under the hands of William Wood Esquire and iustice for the peace in the said countie, Samuel Marshall preacher of Gods Word in Keinton and other persons of qualitie. London: Printed for Tho. Iackson, Ian. 23, 1642 [i.e. 1643].

Kishlansky, Mark. *A Monarchy Transformed, Britain 1603-1714.* London: Penguin Books, 1996.

The New yeares wonder being a most cernaine and true relation of the disturbed inhabitants of Kenton : and other neighbouring villages neere unto Edge-Hil, where the great battaile betwixt the kings army, and the Parliaments forces was fought : in which plea is heard & seene fearfull and strange apparitions of spirits as sounds of drums, trumpets, with the discharging of canons muskies, carbines pettronels, to the terrour and amazement, of all the fearfull hearers and behoulders : certified under the hands of William Wood, Esquier, and Iustice for the peace in the said countie, Samuel Marshall, preacher of Gods word in Keynton, and other persons of qualitie. [London]: Printed for Robert Ellit ..., [1643].

Raymond, Joad. *The Invention of Newspaper: English Newsbooks 1641-1649.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

Religions lotterie, or, The churches amazement vwherein is declared how many sorts of religions there is crept into the very bowels of this kingdome, striving to shake the whole foundation and to destroy both church and kingdom ..., London: Printed by T.F. for F.S., Iuly 20, 1642.

A Relation of a strange apparition in an ale-house next doore to the White Horse, against Sommerset-House in the

Furman Humanities Review

strand where a company of papists were at their exercises : as is conceived the devill in an ugly black shape disturbing them, and tea-ring the rugge and scattering it in pieces up and down the roome : with a relation of a iudgement that strangely fell umpon one at Mr. Mundayes house in Little Brittain: who whilst he was cursing of Mr. Burton, Mr. Prinne and doctor Bastwicke his eares fell a bleeding to the amazement of the beholders. London: Printed for Richard Smethrust, 1641.

A Signe from Heaven, or, A fearefull and terrible noise heard in the ayre at Alborow in the county of Suffolk, on Thursday the 4. day of August at 5. of the clock in the afternoone wherein was heard the beating of drums, the discharging of muskets and other ordnance for the space of an houre and more : as will be attested by many men of good worth and exhibited to some chiefe members of the honourable House of Commons : with a stone that fell from the sky in that storme or noise that of which is here to be seene in towne being of a great weight : whereunto is annexed a prophesie of Merlins concerning Hull in Yorkshire. London: Printed by T. Favvcet, Aug 12, 1642.

Smith, George, ed., *The Scottish dove, sent out and returning Bringing intelligence from their army, and makes some relations of other observable passages of both kingdomes, for information and instruction.* From Friday December 1 to Friday December 8, 1643. Number 8. London: Printed for Laurence Chapman, 1643-1646.

A strange and lamentable accident that happened lately at Mears-Ashby in Northamptonshire. 1642. Of one Mary Wilmore, wife to Iohn Wilmore rough mason, who was delivered of a childe without a head, and

Xinin Zhang

credibly reported to have a firme crosse on the brest, as this ensuing story shall relate. Printed at London: for Rich: Harper and Thomas Wine, and are to be sold at the Bible and Harpe in Smithfield, 1642.

A strange wonder, or, the cities amazement. Being a relation occasioned by a wonderfull and vnusuall accident, that happened in the river of Thames, Friday, Feb. 4. 1641. There flowing two tydes at London-Bridge, within the space of an houre and a halfe, the last coming with such violence and hideous noyse that it not onely affrighted, but even astonished above 500. water-men that stood beholding it, on both sides the Thames. Which latter tyde rose sixe foote higher then the former tyde had done, to the great admiration of all men. London: Printed for Iohn Thomas, 1641 [i.e. 1642].

Soergel, Philip M. *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonder Book in Reformation Germany.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Vicars, John. *Prodigies & apparitions, or, Englands warning piece being a seasonable description by lively figures & apt illustration of many remarkable & prodigious fore-runners & apparent predictions of Gods wrath against England, if not timely prevented by true repentance / written by J. V., [London?]: Are to be sould by Tho. Bates ... by Ralphe Markland ..., 1643*

Walsham, Alexandra. *Providence in Early Modern England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Whiting, Robert. *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Furman Humanities Review

Wonderfull nevves: or, A true relation of a churchwarden in the towne of Tesceter, in Northamptonshire, whose wife first died wonderfull strangely, and then himselfe fell mad, and died. As also his sister her hands now rotting the flesh from the bones, in a most grievous and loathsome manner. The causes you shall finde in the ensuing sad relation. Attested by sufficient vvitnesses. Printed at London: for Tho: Andrews, 1642.